

The United States and Pakistan: Navigating a Complex Relationship: Preeta Bansal

Opening Remarks

June 30, 2005 Good afternoon. My name is Preeta Bansal, and I serve as chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I'd like to welcome you to today's hearing to examine U.S. policy towards Pakistan. We have a very full program today, so I will keep my opening remarks brief. You can see from the signs the names of the other commissioners present: Commission Vice Chairs Felice D. Gaer and Nina Shea, as well as Commissioner Michael Cromartie. Also present is Joseph Crapa, the Executive Director of the Commission. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by Congress in 1998 through the International Religious Freedom Act with two purposes: to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress as to how U.S. policy can most effectively advance freedom of religion or belief and related human rights. The Commission is an independent, bipartisan advisory body made up of Commissioners appointed by the President and both houses of Congress but separate from them. The Commission has long been concerned about the situation for freedom of religion or belief in Pakistan. These concerns include: (1) the continued inadequate response of the government of Pakistan to persistent sectarian and religiously motivated violence, which mainly targets Shia Muslims but also Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and other religious minorities; (2) official government policies, such as the anti-Ahmadi laws, which prevent the Ahmadis from engaging in the full practice of their faith, and the highly abused blasphemy laws, which result in the detention of, and sometimes violence against, religious minorities as well as Muslims on account of their religious beliefs; and (3) the largely unchecked growth of Islamic extremist organizations and political parties whose members frequently take part in violence targeting religious minorities in Pakistan and abroad. Today, however, we are not here to examine further conditions for religious freedom and other human rights in Pakistan. Indeed, since 2002, the Commission has deemed those conditions serious enough to recommend that Pakistan be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for the severe violations of religious freedom that take place there. Instead it is the second of the Commission's two principal mandates—the mandate to make policy recommendations to the U.S. government—that is the reason for today's hearing. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that the relationship with Pakistan is among the most complex for U.S. foreign policy. Since Pakistan's independence, the United States has had what could be called an on-again, off-again relationship with that country. Pakistan was a strong ally during much of the Cold War; however, U.S. concerns about Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons, and the 1999 military coup against the civilian government, resulted in the suspension of U.S. assistance or other ties at various times. The events of September 11 markedly transformed U.S.-Pakistani relations. Pakistan is now considered to be a key player in the U.S.-led war on terrorism, particularly with regard to the Administration's efforts against Al-Qaeda and Taliban remnants that have retreated into the largely impenetrable areas on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism 2004, released in April 2005, states that "Pakistan continues to be one of the United States' most important partners in the war on terrorism." After 9/11, remaining sanctions were waived and large amounts of U.S. aid began to flow, including a \$3 billion aid package announced in July 2003, which involves five annual installments of \$600 million each beginning in this fiscal year, split evenly between military and economic aid. In March 2004, Secretary of State Powell announced the U.S. government's intention to designate Pakistan a "non-NATO ally." The benefits of this status include exemption from suspension of U.S. military assistance, access to certain cooperative training agreements with the United States, and eligibility for expedited processing of export licenses of commercial satellites. The proposal was endorsed by the Congress and the formal designation was made by President Bush in June of last year. And in March 2005, the U.S. government announced that it planned to resume selling F-16 fighters to Pakistan. However, an increasing number of observers of Pakistan are raising questions about the current state of affairs in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Some have contended that the current focus on security matters has resulted in a pointed muting of virtually all criticism of other policies of the Musharraf government, even those policies that may ultimately be undermining U.S. anti-terrorism efforts. The Musharraf government's policies on democracy and other human rights continue to generate criticism, as does its record on religious freedom. Since overthrowing the civilian government in 1999, General Musharraf has taken a number of undemocratic actions, including altering the Constitution and pointedly side-lining the non-religious democratic parties, in order to bolster his own power. What is more, some contend that his government has done little to combat Islamic extremism in Pakistan and instead has forged political alliances with religious extremist groups, thereby strengthening them. And I think everyone here is aware of two very recent—and very public—incidents of human rights violations on the part of Pakistani officials that occurred in only the last few weeks. Last month, in response to an attack on women athletes by Islamic extremists, a number of human rights activists gathered in the city of Lahore to protest the rising incidents of violence against women. The protesters, who included Asma Jahangir, former head of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission and currently the UN's Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and Joseph Francis, an activist on behalf of religious minorities in Pakistan, were met with an outrageous level of violence from police. Over forty persons, all of them noted for their actions on behalf of human rights in Pakistan, were attacked by police, beaten, and arrested. In the second case, just two weeks ago, a woman who had been brutally gang-raped as part of a horrifying tribal punishment custom was refused permission to travel abroad and put under house arrest because the government appeared to be more concerned about "protecting its image" than about protecting human rights. Clearly, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship presents a confluence of concerns—perhaps competing concerns. The Commission is aware of the mix of critical issues involved and it is that very complexity that we hope to examine in depth today. Some of the

questions we hope to have addressed include: are religious freedom and other human rights being given the necessary focus in current U.S. policy toward Pakistan? Should the United States be pressing the Pakistani government more strongly on its human rights concerns or would this threaten crucial U.S. counter-terrorism interests? Is the substantial increase in aid to Pakistan and other benefits-non-NATO ally status, for example-the right course of action? Is the Musharraf government doing enough to combat Islamic extremism and if the answer is no, what is the consequence for the U.S.' war against terrorism? To speak to these and other issues, we are pleased to have before us a distinguished panel of experts, from a variety of backgrounds. Before we hear from our witnesses, let me just say a word about the structure of the hearing. We would like each of our panelists to speak for 10 minutes, which should leave us plenty of time for us to ask follow-up questions. Each of you may, however, submit longer statements that will be posted on the Commission's Website.